

DIVERGENT ISSUES AND CHANGES

Volume I



RESEARCH AND EXTENSION CELL
GOVERNMENT JOHNSON COLLEGE
AIZAWL, MIZORAM - 796001

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2021

GOVT. JOHNSON COLLEGE

Edition – 2021

Price – ₹ 300.00

ISBN : 978-81-950949-8-1

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Published by and Printed at
KL Offset Printers
MG Road, Upper Khatla
Aizawl, Mizoram
Ph. 0389-2311260 / 9862725123
Email : kloffsetprinters@gmail.com

TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*: STORY TELLING AND 'REMEMORY'

- Dr. Ramdinthari

Abstract: *Memory, if not confronted and rather repressed will eventually haunt back an individual. The paper is an attempt to study how the repressed memories can be brought back suddenly if triggered by certain conditions and, also how storytelling can be valuable and at the same time, a dangerous way to confront the past. In the novel, the sudden reappearance of Paul D and Beloved in Sethe's life signifies the return of the repressed memory and it reminds Sethe of her painful and traumatic memory. She has no other choice but to allow herself to remember and thus 'rememory' occurs in her life and gives Sethe and the other characters in the novel a new strength to move forward to the future.*

Keywords: *Beloved, memory, rememory, traumatic.*

Beloved (1987) chronicles the traumatic effects of slavery and how the devastating effect shatters the lives of the characters. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. The story is set in 1873, and thematically it deals with a recollection of memories- the memory of slavery and the concept of remembering. Toni Morrison (1931- 2019) seems to write for the lives of the slaves whose history was left out of the slave narratives. Using the present tense to convey the vividness of the memories of her characters, it is a story of a visit from the past and how it subsequently changes the emotional lives of the characters. Set during an important period in American history *Beloved* chronicles the years of the Civil War and, of slavery. After the civil war ended, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, life was still difficult for the black people, whether they remain slaves or are freed. Black women can reclaim their history by writing about it, and the style of *Beloved*, which pays tribute to the non-literary background of black culture, places the novel at the very heart of this process. Toni Morrison uses the protagonists' varying visions of events to compile her history of slavery. There are significant gaps in her narrative: the past is not divided from the present, the two are interdependent and the boundaries between them are blurred. It is possible to view *Beloved* as a 'history of the present', where the consequences of slavery's brutality are examined through the 'rememory' of her characters.

Beloved begins in 1873, though the narrative stretches back to include the memory of Sethe's mother, and Baby Suggs (Sethe's mother-in-law). Toni Morrison focuses on the issue of slavery by fictionalizing the historical fact that slave mothers sometimes killed their children rather than allow them to become slaves. Such an event is recounted in the story of Margaret Garner¹, a work conceived by Morrison and made up of newspaper cuttings, songs,

photographs, recipes and, other memorabilia, to produce a history of anonymous black men and women. Like Garner, Sethe kills her daughter and attempts to destroy her other children to prevent them from being recaptured as fugitives. Morrison says she wrote *Beloved* convinced that:

This has got to be the least read of all the book I'd written because it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean its national amnesia.²

Memory, if not confronted and rather, repressed will eventually haunt back an individual. *Beloved* chronicles the story of a black woman who fails to articulate her traumatic past. In the novel, Sethe tells Paul, "Schoolteacher made me open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still." (Morrison 9) What is apparent here is that Sethe is still psychologically haunted by her traumatic memories of the brutality she has endured in the past. At the same time, the tree scar reminds her not only of the abuse she endures while she was in Sweet Home but it also denotes an intrusion of the past into the present. Paul D tells Sethe that together they have "more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow. (Morrison 273) Sethe has already acknowledged this factor: "Her story was bearable because it was his as well - to tell, to refine, and to tell again." (Morrison 99) She also comments on the impossibility of making plans:

Her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day. (Morrison 70)

Thus, Paul D's declaration that he and Sethe must create some kind of tomorrow expresses the hope that having exorcised the past, embodied by the carnal manifestation of Beloved, they can gain access to the future and to the right to plan.

Beloved exorcised 'yesterday' to prepare a future for its protagonists. The character of Beloved is an embodiment of the past, and her appearance stimulates Denver's maturity. She is forgotten and the novel comes to a close. Significantly when Sethe fully realizes that Beloved is her daughter, she goes to work wrapped in a "timeless present." (Morrison 184) She abandons her adult responsibilities towards the future, she stop going to work and subsequently loses her job. She spends her life-savings on clothes, and defies temporality by planting a garden out of season. Sethe feels that she can discard the burden of her past since Beloved is back. Unfortunately, her guilt is not so easily absolved, as she is punished by her daughter and by herself. Only at the close of the novel, the reader is left with a feeling that Sethe's turbulent past has been put to rest. Up to this point, which only occurs in the epilogue, the past has had a central role in the novel. It is characterized as a force, leaping in and out of the narrative:

To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay. (Morrison 42)

It becomes something that has to be suppressed with aggression, "the day's work of beating back the past." (Morrison 73) The power of the past is demonstrated by the near-constant use of the present tense. Remembered experience is sufficiently vivid to overpower the boundaries of time. It is only in the epilogue that Toni Morrison employs a definitive past tense and the distancing that this entails.

Sigmund Freud in his book *Moses and Monotheism* elucidated that within the unconscious:

the repressed retains its upward urge, its effort to force its way to consciousness. (95)

What Freud means here is that the repressed memories can be brought back suddenly if triggered by certain conditions. In *Beloved* the sudden reappearance of Paul D signifies the return of the repressed memory and it reminds Sethe of her painful and traumatic memory. She has no other choice but to allow herself to remember and thus 'rememory' occurs in her life. (Morrison 4) Carolin Rody defines "rememory" in her article "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: History, 'Rememory,' and a 'Clamor for a Kiss'" as a "heightened imaginative power ... (which) represent the past." (*American Literary History* 102) She explains that Toni Morrison uses the technique of remembering the past to illustrate "collective memory" by narrating and exploring African-American trauma. (*American Literary History* 101) Sethe explains the term 'rememory' in this manner, "If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world...Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on... And you think it's you thinking it up...But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. (Morrison 20) While the sudden arrival of Paul D brings back the life at 'Sweet Home', the arrival of Beloved (who is an embodiment of the murdered daughter) allows Sethe to be forgiven and be redeemed. Finally, Sethe can let her thoughts flow freely as she believes that Beloved's return is symbolic of forgiveness and reconciliation and she rejoices:

And my girl come home. Now I can look at things again because she's hereto see them too. After the

shed, I stopped. Now, in the morning, when I light the fire, I mean to look out the window to see what the sun is doing to the day. (107)

She is now able to look at the world with a new perspective as she courage herself to face her repressed memories and her fears.

Maurice Halbwachs in his seminal work *On Collective Memory* states that "memory operates through stories and storytelling." (38) Storytelling becomes how memories live on. *Beloved* narrates the value and at the same time the danger of storytelling. Sethe tells Denver about her family and how she was born and this gives Denver a sense of personal history. As storytelling spread between Sethe, Baby Suggs, Paul D, and Denver, their personal history gives birth to collective memories and the former slaves can tell their stories by collective oral tradition about the past. *Beloved* is hungry to hear stories of the past and Sethe enjoys telling the stories to her which she has never told to Denver or Paul D. *Beloved* becomes instrumental in helping Sethe in her journey of remembering as she unlocks the emotions and memories which have been locked away for a long time. She can make Sethe and Paul D to remember and finally deal with their traumatic past. This is what Bell Hooks talked about when she argues, "when the person confronts the past without shame, he/she is free of itshold on him/her." (Teaching Community 119) Morrison's use of 'rememory' and the figure of *Beloved* herself give rise to many psychoanalytical readings of the novel. Freud concept of 'the return of the repressed' has obvious resonance for the book. Freud developed the theory of psychoanalysis as a means of curing neuroses in his patients, but the concepts were expanded by him and his followers as a means of understanding human behaviour

and culture. From the light of this reading, *Beloved* can be perceived as the projection of the repressed collective memory of a violated people.

Toni Morrison has been narrating the 'same' event in the story several times, but each with the difference of 'duration' and 'focalization' (the angle or perspective from which the event is represented). All the important events in the novel are narrated more than once and therefore marked by repetitive narrative memory. In her essay, 'History, Memory and Language in Morrison's *Beloved*', Rebecca Ferguson states that memory is a crucial concern in the writings of many Afro-American novelists since their history has been, "dismembered and unaccounted for". Ferguson further deduce;

theirs (the Afro-Americans) is a history of oppression, but one that must be remembered, accounted for, and while the language of the dominant culture and the written work itself have all too often been potent instruments in that oppression, not to have made of them, is to be rendered impotent in ways that matter greatly. (Selsers 109)

Therefore, like storytelling, writing and memory are intrinsically linked together for a writer like Toni Morrison. Memory becomes very important in constructing the repressed history. James Baldwin (1924 - 87) a famous black writer and social activist, writes in his book *Notes of a Native Son* that; "The past is all that makes the present coherent." History plays a crucial role in shaping identity, both black and white people. The history of slavery is personally significant for Morrison and for all black and white people. What is apparent here is that for Morrison, black history is the core of black identity and a means to rediscover who they really are. Through *Beloved*, Toni

Morrison breaks the national amnesia and highlight what was omitted in the history of America. She reveals the brutality of slavery and how it affects the psyche of the ex-slaves. Sethe and Paul D first repressed their experience, and then use rememory to reconcile with their past, and then finally, restore their sense of self which enable them to reconnect with their psychological and historical past. This finally gives them a new strength to move forward to a better future.

End Notes:

1. Kristine Yoke in her essay "Margaret Garner, Rememory and the Infinite Past: History in *Beloved*" explains the motivation of Margaret Garner courageous actions in killing her children where she said that Margaret decides to kill her children and end their sufferings rather than taken back to slavery.
2. This is an excerpt from Bonnie Angelo's article "The Pain of Being Black". *TIME*, 22 May 1989. Content. time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,957724,00.html.

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